

Gnosis and Other Poems of Union With the Absolute: Part One

Kirby Record

Gnosis, the Greek word for knowledge, is an elusive concept that has permeated the spiritual tradition of the West from the early mysticism of the Greeks to the present age. What is most commonly associated with *gnosis* is the unique and relatively specific historical movement we know as “Gnosticism,” which itself is extremely varied and complex in its range of beliefs and cultist practices, taking place in the second and third centuries and branded as various forms of heresy by authorities of the orthodox Catholic Church. Even in Western scholarship on *gnosis* and Gnosticism, traditions vary sharply, sometimes equating the two terms, and at other times using the term *gnosis* as a broad concept within which a narrower, more strictly historical reference to the second and third century heretical religious cult is intended by “Gnosticism.” This essay will not attempt to unravel the two terms’ complex and diverse range of meanings but will simply take note of a few of its most prominent and pervasive connotations.

Kurt Rudolph reports in his book *Gnosis* that “the central myth” of Gnosticism assumes the presence of a divine spark in man, which has degenerated in the world we now live in and must therefore be awakened through communion (and union) with a divine essence in order to be restored. Rudolph cites the 1966 Congress on the Origins of Gnosticism in this comment concerning the central myth: “the idea of the presence in man of a divine “spark”..., which has proceeded from the divine world and has fallen into this world of destiny, birth and death and which must be reawakened through its own divine counterpart ... to be restored.” (57) This basic myth carries with it the conception of duality in our very existence, which includes the afterlife that monotheistic believers now think of as Heaven and Hell over which God as creator has dominion. Gnosticism rejected the traditional dualistic view of God as the creator of all things, Heaven as opposed to Hell, and even Good as opposed to Evil. However, the Gnostics had their own form of dualism in which they conceived of the spirit as utterly distinct from matter and the world traditionally thought of as God’s creation (that is, the world we inhabit) as actually created by the Demiurge, which is a corruption of the original and true God, who created nothing since all was spirit.

In this respect the material world is itself a corruption and as in Buddhism, a kind of illusion. All that is left of the original pre-creation is the spark or *pneuma* of each human being. A person who seeks true knowledge or *gnosis* in the esoteric sense we are exploring, seeks to live outside the framework of traditional systems of worship, and to find the God within himself

or herself in order to rekindle the spark, which is at best only smoldering. Although the awakening of the spark within is the center of gnostic beliefs, the means by which one can achieve this varies greatly. *Gnosis* is knowledge gained by personal experience, rather than through the teachings in books or the teachings of others, with the exception that one can be guided by a master, who was regarded very much like the traditional Zen master of Chinese and Japanese traditions. That is to say, genuine enlightenment was recognized and certified only through intense scrutiny and rigorous examination by a previously certified master.

Harold Bloom, in his book *The American Religion*, cites *gnosis* as one of the three central characteristics of American mystic faith, lying outside the domain of orthodox Christianity. Along with Enthusiasm and American Orphism (page 45; see note #1), *gnosis* forms a framework for the American's very personal and direct communion with God or Jesus (as the son of God). Bloom makes note of the very ancient concept of a magic or occult self, the "spark" or *pneuma*, rather than the soul or psyche. He cites Hans Jonas, who informs us that the same concept of *pneuma* is contrasted in the writings of Paul with the concepts of soul and psyche, known to and used by the ancient Greeks. Also called the "seed of light," the "inner man" and "the new man," pneumatic man is probably as close the "enlightened" man of Asian spiritual practice as Western mysticism can get. We will return to this extraordinary concept again but it is now best to proceed to the main theme of this essay, which is the expression of *gnosis* in poems from diverse traditions. Since we are dealing with poems in translation and not in their original linguistic forms, the main focus of attention will be the psychological and intellectual content of the message, rather than formal matters of prosody and verbal nuance.

First, let us take a look at several poems by the Islamic Sufi poet Kabir (1398–1518; see note #2). Like Rumi (1207–1273) and other ecstatic mystic poets of that general era and region, Kabir writes of joyous personal knowledge, his own *gnosis*, and is openly disparaging of traditional dogmas and other forms of religious coercion. The following short poem is a good point of departure.

My inside, listen to me, the greatest spirit,
the Teacher, is near,
wake up, wake up!

Run to his feet—
he is standing close to your head right now.

You have slept for millions and millions of years.

Why not wake up this morning? (Kabir 13)

The poem opens with the speaker telling himself to look inside, that the greatest teacher is

to be found within and that it is time to awake from his sleep of millions of years. In this very simple poem one of the salient features in many poems of *gnosis* can be seen clearly. The poet presents a kind of spiritual duality in the form of a dialogue with two aspects of one's self. Paradoxically, spiritual truth exists both within oneself and in communion with the universal spirit, which are one but must be *talked about* separately, if only because of the segregating nature of language.

Another commonality of poems informed by *gnosis* is the merging of spiritual nature with the physical body, often expressed in explicitly erotic language. Indeed, several of the poets not only blur the spiritual and the physical, they find the ultimate spirituality in the experience of sexuality itself. Thus, we find Kabir writing the following lines: "Oh friend, I love you, think this over/carefully! If you are in love,/then why are you asleep?//If you have found him,/give yourself to him, take him." (3) And again, "I played for ten years with the girls my own age, /but now I am suddenly in fear. /I am on the way up some stairs—they are high. /Yet I have to give up my fears/if I want to take part in this love.//I have to let go the protective clothes/and meet him with the whole length of my body." (42) Kabir typically writes with a feminine persona, perhaps because he feels this is more in keeping with his mysterious and seductive tone. Some key words that permeate the poems are those of the "teacher," the "lover" and the "guest." For an example of the latter: "Kabir says: Listen, my friend/there is one thing in the world that satisfies,/and that is a meeting with the Guest." (1)

At times it seems that he refers in these poems to some spiritual entity outside himself since he is always seeking union of body and mind with these entities. However, in the following poem, as in many others, we discover their true identity, which is the God within the self, but the God that emerges only when the ego has been abandoned.

I said to the wanting creature inside me:
What is this river you want to cross?
There are no travelers on the river-road, and no road.
Do you see anyone moving about on that bank, or
resting?
There is no river at all, and no boat, and no boatman.
There is no towrope either, and no one to pull it.
There is no ground, no sky, no time, no bank, no
ford!

And there is no body, and no mind!
Do you believe there is some place that will make the
soul less thirsty?
In that great absence you will find nothing.

Be strong then, and enter into your own body;
there you have a solid place for your feet.
Think about it carefully!
Don't go off somewhere else!

Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of
imaginary things,
and stand firm in that which you are. (17)

It becomes clear that the lover, the guest and the teacher are all oneself, devoid of personal illusion and self-aggrandizement. Although this much may seem simple, it is actually surrounded by paradox, evocative of the mystery of the Christian trinity, in which God is conceived of three in One: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this mystery the route to God is through the self but the God (the "Guest") is so far beyond self that it cannot be uttered. We can find many of Kabir's characteristic motifs in the final excerpt:

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think...and think...while you are alive.
What you call "salvation" belongs to the time before
death.

.....
The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten –
that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment in the City
of Death.
If you make love with the divine now, in the next life
you will have the face of satisfied desire. (24)

Another prominent theme involves the co-occurrence of union with the Spirit or Guest with the annihilation of the ego-dominated body and mind. As Kabir writes: "When affection for the I-creature and what it owns is dead,/then the work of the Teacher is over." (15) The poet speaks repeatedly of awakening, as indeed do many of the great religious masters from Jesus to Buddha. Although he was born of Muslim parents and lived in a traditional Islamic world, and his spiritual guru was Hindu, he rejected anything that smacked of indoctrination and dogma.

Many poets from Western and Eastern traditions seem similar to Kabir in many respects, even though their direct contact with Gnostic teachings may have been minimal or nil. The salient aspects of Kabir's *gnosis* are, to recapitulate, a belief in the *pneuma* or spark latent in human spirits that has fallen asleep and must be awakened, the conviction that this spark can only come through direct experience and not through secondary sources, the rejection of the traditional duality of soul and body and finally the loss of individual ego as it applies to both body and mind.

We shall now turn briefly to William Blake, who perhaps more than any Western poet, rejected traditional theological constrictions, especially Christian moral prohibitions in his ecstatic celebration of erotic mysticism. Blake's example is interesting on many levels but it is especially useful since he provides abundant and clear testimony concerning his mystic beliefs and his overt rejection of the traditional Christian moral system in which he was raised. Furthermore, his rejection of traditional sexual restrictions in favor of unfettered indulgence of bodily pleasures as inseparable from the experience of the divine in man may remind us of the rejection of traditional mores and dogma in the Sufi version of Gnostic tradition.

First, let us look at some selection from Blake's narrative poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which takes the form of a dialectic between the Devil, various Angels and Blake himself. The proverbs of the Devil, of course, run counter to the traditional Christian strictures regarding the indulgence in bodily pleasures. Yet Blake's attitude toward these "Hellish" proverbs seems more favorable than neutral, a view that is later confirmed by his vigorous disputes with an Angel. A few of the proverbs of Hell:

THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:

1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body; & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following contraries to these are True:

1. Man has no body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.

In this poem Blake engages the Angel of the narrative in a dispute, which ultimately offers more support to the proverbs of Hell than anything allegedly attributed to Heaven. In fact, in the last of the “memorable fancies” that occur in the text, the Angel is “converted” and “arose as Elijah,” with whom Blake, as the speaker of the poem, often reads the Bible in its “infernal or diabolical sense.” (263–264)

A few comments on the above citations and paraphrases will reveal some affinity to the views previously cited regarding the Sufi Kabir and the Gnostic tradition. It is first of all a rejection of the duality between Heaven and Hell, Body and Soul. It rejects the dominance of reason in human nature as a restriction of primal energy. Energy is Blake’s version of the *pneuma* or spark of the Gnostics. These and other related themes permeate Blake’s poems and prints and if anything, his attacks on traditional religious dogma are even more scathing and contemptuous than those of Kabir. It should be noted that Blake’s views are also a reaction against 18th century rationalism and the emergence of science, but his antagonism toward the prevailing views of his time are intensified by his visionary and (this essay argues) Gnostic outlook. But let us glance at a few more lines from Blake’s poetry to see how he expresses his mystic vision of the world. From *Songs of Experience* we find the following:

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I had never seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And “Thou shalt not” writ over the door;
So I turn’d to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires. (111)

It should not be difficult to see similarities between the ideas and feelings in the above poem to the basic views already outlined as arising from or influenced by *gnosis*. The childhood Garden of Love, where he used to play on the green, has been replaced by the stricture of “Thou shalt

not” so reminiscent of the same prohibition found in the Judaic-Christian Ten Commandments. Instead of flowers, he sees graves and tomb-stones, where all around were priests clad in black, “binding with briars my joys and desires.” What we see in this mini dramatic scene is a metaphoric depiction of the Gnostic rejection of traditional moral restraints in favor of life’s joys and desires.

In a final reference from Blake, we can find in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in the section called “A SONG OF LIBERTY” the following lines:

Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn no longer, in
deadly black, with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor
his accepted brethren—whom, tyrant, he calls free—
lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale religious
letchery call that virginity that wishes but acts not!

For every thing that lives is Holy. (266)

Here Blake sets forth in abundantly clear language his antipathy toward organized religious domination over the body and soul, which he refuses to segregate in his celebration of life and joy. It should not be thought here that this essay suggests that all those who have been influenced by *gnosis* share Blake’s endorsement of sexual liberty. What is more central to the point is that Blake continuously endorsed a doctrine of unbridled joy, a release from rationality and social strictures, and a personal union with the divine conceived of and expressed in sensual metaphors. As far as anyone knows, in fact, Blake’s sexual promiscuity was purely poetic and never acted upon in his personal life.

We have now come to the end of Part One of this essay. In Part Two we will compare the attitudes and concepts shared by Kabir and Blake to selected poems of Zen monks speaking particularly on the subject of their *satori* or awakening but also on other matters. Special attention will be given to the great, iconoclastic Zen monk Ikkyu, who at least in regard to sexual attitudes, makes both Kabir and Blake seem tame by comparison. In the concluding section of this essay, we will turn to modern and postmodern writers of the gnostic, Zen and Western mystic tradition, such as Shinkichi Takahashi.

Notes

1. Although Bloom is oddly cryptic in his explication of these terms, one can roughly define Enthusiasm as a kind of ecstatic experience with God, involving such behavior as trances, wild dancing, speaking in tongues, and other manifestations of the Divine communion or possession. Such behaviors recall the Sufi trances induced by whirling, as in the Whirling Dervishes of Sufi sects emerging from the more ancient practices of Rumi and Kabir. Orphism indicates a form of enlightenment during which the individual

transcends ordinary consciousness and recognizes the divinity within. In Bloom's own words, orphism is "an esoteric mystery cult whose central teaching was the potential divinity of the elitist self. A religion of quasi-shamanistic ecstasy, it preached the extraordinary ideal that the redeemed or resurrected human life would be an eternal intoxication." (p. 52) Note for the sake of comparison that Sufi poets too referred to their spiritual ecstasies as states of intoxication.

2. The dates for Kabir's death vary, but most sources give the year 1518, which would mean he lived an unlikely 120 years.

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(カービー レコード 本学元教授)